



## GUTENBERG COLLEGE

### **Learning as an Act of Will**

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**By Eliot Grasso, Ph.D.**

At Gutenberg College, we are passionate about education, and we are passionate about learning. We exist for the sake of our students so that they can pursue the truth of what it means to be a human being within the framework of a biblical worldview. We read and discuss the great books because we believe that this enterprise provides lasting benefit to students who intend to live good lives before their God.

Learning is a complex enterprise because human beings are complex. We have desires, hopes, and fears. We have assumptions, commitments, and honest questions. This world is a challenging place, and it is our great hope that all who learn at, from, and through Gutenberg have the opportunity to investigate what it means to live in such a world while being made in the image of God.

It is becoming harder and harder to find places where truth can be pursued in an unbiased and earnest way. It is becoming harder and harder to find places that are not ideologically coercive and doctrinaire. It is becoming harder and harder to find teachers who are not restrained from creating learning environments where students can take on the project of learning for themselves. Gutenberg College is a safe place for difficult questions that must be asked. We are a community that is overseen entirely by faculty that are confident that the biblical worldview is true—that what the Scriptures have to say about God, man, and ultimate reality is true.

Our great hope is that our students will ultimately come to place their confidence in that truth as well, that they will take the responsibility to own this process for themselves. The easy path is to tell students *what* to think. It is more difficult to trust God by focusing on helping them learn *how* to think. Students are valuable and capable, deserving of love and respect, and that is how we treat them at Gutenberg College.

We straddle the line between openness and rigor. There are no wrong questions at Gutenberg College, but there are conclusions that are ultimately true and some conclusions that are ultimately not true. Life takes wisdom, and wisdom is a skill that requires discernment, understanding, clarity, and discipline. We believe that living life entails great struggle and suffering but that we can trust that whatever plan God has in mind for His people is a very good one. And so we proceed as a community of learners to work out our faith with fear and trembling, spurring our students to think deeply about what matters most in life and to pursue the truth wherever it leads.

For over 25 years, Gutenberg College has been a haven for people from all walks of life to come together in fellowship to learn from each other and from the Bible. We are glad that you are here with us today. We have billed our conference in the following way: in the predominant view of education, the student's primary job is to consume and store information, much like a computer. But such a view misses the true nature of learning. Learning is a dynamic process in which a student, like an apprentice, slowly builds skills and knowledge, constantly self-correcting toward mastery and a sound worldview. A key component of the process—frequently

overlooked in modern education—is a student’s moral orientation toward truth. We are suggesting that the predominant view, the mainstream view that determines the goals and methods of learning, is somehow insufficient. Something is going on with this approach to learning that is not quite right.

### ASSUMPTIONS OF THE PREDOMINANT VIEW

All approaches—to anything really—have underlying assumptions, that is, ideas about what is true and what should be done in light of that truth. Different views are often defined and distinguished by their assumptions. The assumptions underlying the predominant view of education can differ from the assumptions underlying the biblical view. When those of us who hold a biblical worldview observe that the predominant view of education frequently overlooks a student’s moral orientation toward truth, we may ask, “Why on earth would an educational system overlook one’s moral orientation toward truth?” I think two assumptions contribute to an answer: The first relates to the nature of human beings and the second to the nature of knowing.

#### **Assumption 1: Man Is Morally Neutral**

The predominant view of education holds that human beings are morally neutral, like a computer. The predominant view overlooks man’s moral orientation because from this perspective, man *has no moral orientation*. Man is neither inherently good nor inherently evil. At birth, man is a blank drive whose moral program is coded into him through in the assembly-line process of education.

Underlying this framework is the belief that man’s goodness or badness is ultimately caused by whatever takes place in man’s environment. This view of man’s moral neutrality has been around a long time. If you asked Aristotle 2,400 years ago, “How does one acquire moral virtue?” he would likely give an answer similar to the one he gave in *The Nicomachean Ethics*: “...legislators make the citizens good by forming habits in them, and this is the wish of every legislator, and those who do not effect it miss their mark...”<sup>1</sup> Basically, the idea here is this: if you want a good society, you need good citizens. You can make citizens good by prescription. If you give citizens a particular education, they will become good at being citizens. After all, how could they become anything else? If you were to ask Aristotle why people do bad things, he would say that people only do bad things because they are ignorant. In this view, when you replace ignorance with knowledge, you can transform badness into goodness—a belief shared by the predominate view of education.

If it is true that people only do bad because they are ignorant, then education is the key to goodness. When we replace ignorance with knowledge, we will become more virtuous people. Without education, we are doomed to do bad while mistakenly believing that we are doing good. This line of thinking assumes that human beings are morally neutral.

#### **Assumption 2: Knowing Is a Passive Activity**

The second assumption of the predominant view of education relates to the nature of knowing. The study of what and how people know—*epistemology*—has a long and interesting

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross, *Oxford World’s Classics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 23.

history. As you might expect, not everyone agrees about what we can know or how it is that we can know it. This is not the sort of talk in which I will attempt to give an overview of this long and lively discussion. Rather, I will focus on one view of knowledge that is still dominant today, especially in fields of study like the biological sciences. That view of knowledge is called *empiricism*. If you are an empiricist, then you think that the only way humans can know anything is through the senses. An investigation of empiricism will uncover the second critical assumption held in the predominant view of education: knowing is a passive activity.

Perhaps one of the most influential advocates of empiricism was the eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume. As an empiricist, Hume thought that the only way we can know things is through sense experience. This is quite a break from earlier approaches to knowing. For example, in the Middle Ages, people believed that your mind could know things that had nothing to do with your senses—you came to know God not by exploring the natural world but by prayerful contemplation. By contrast, for Hume, you need to see, smell, taste, touch, or hear it yourself to know it. For Hume, the mind is not active in knowing—rather, it is passive.

So how did this empiricism work in Hume’s philosophy? Imagine that your mind is a big lump of red clay. You are outside for a walk on a cool autumn day. You see a bird sitting on a branch. If you asked Hume how your mind knows the bird is there, he would likely say that the impact of the visual image of that bird on your mind is like taking your thumb and pressing it deep into that big, red lump of clay. After you press your thumb into the clay, the clay doesn’t do anything with the thumbprint—it just sits there. For Hume, the clay is your mind. Seeing the bird is your thumb pressing into it. This is what it means to know something as an empiricist: sense experience alone causes you to know things. As such, your mind does not filter or interpret any of your sense experience. All the knowledge you have enters your mind as pure, raw data—like impressions on a lump of clay.

Hume’s idea of passive knowing might sound pretty implausible. How could someone possibly think that our experiences of the world would be so lifeless in a living mind? But, if you’ve ever heard of an “objective fact,” then you’ve encountered Hume’s empiricism view alive and well. The word “fact” comes from the Latin verb *factito* meaning “to make” or “to do.” Facts are bits of information that are “*done to you*,” like a thumb making a mark on a lump of clay. When it comes to something like a fact, the assumption is that there is no interpretation involved. Facts are presented as raw data, uninterpreted and unfiltered. When you know a fact, you know something clear, distinct, and certain—a piece of information that is totally independent of human interpretation and judgment. A fact is a piece of human knowledge with the humanity stripped away.

(Now, some of you may be wondering: Where is he going with this? Is he saying there isn’t objective reality? Is he saying that my moral bearing will prevent me from knowing the truth? No, I am not implying any of those things, and the rest of my talk should allay those fears. But let me just say here that I think an independent, truly knowable reality exists beyond myself; that God designed us to know what is true; and if God wants to make Himself known to us, we can know Him.)

I think that we can rely on our senses to help us to accurately know the world around us—I just think that there is a lot more to knowing than sense perception. My point here is that the predominant view of education assumes passive knowing—described in Hume—and moral neutrality. Why might someone accept these assumptions?

I think someone would accept these assumptions because of the implicit potential for human progress. If “knowing” simply amounts to passive data collection and the material world is finite, then we move increasingly and inexorably toward total knowledge of the material world. Once we have total knowledge of the material world, then we can predict and ultimately control all of nature. Once we have total control, we will have everything we need to enjoy life.

In line with this, to be morally neutral is to have great potential, which makes the project of education tremendously significant. If the role of education is to train someone into morally good condition, then one becomes good by having the right education. If everyone gets the right education, then everyone will become good—man shall only *will* what he is taught to *will*. If everyone wills good, then society, too, shall become good. This assumption—in particular—is what makes education such an important piece on the sociological chessboard. Education is the primary tool used to shape people into the sort of people who will be good for society and, thus, make society good.

These first two assumptions work particularly well together if we add a third assumption: the only thing that there is to know about is the material world. If all of reality is only matter in motion, if chemistry and physics can fully account for the totality of what is real, then man’s neutrality and man’s passive knowing fit comfortably with this third assumption. If these assumptions are the right ones, then quite a hopeful long-term picture begins to emerge for the naturalist, the materialist, and the humanist. As we will see, however, the Bible presents quite a different picture of man’s moral standing and of man’s ability to know.

## ASSUMPTIONS OF A BIBLICAL WORLDVIEW

As I stated earlier, all ideas have underlying assumptions. We have looked at two that underlie the predominant view of education. Now, let’s contrast those assumptions with those that undergird the biblical worldview. Let us think together about the biblical connection between knowing and willing, since knowing and willing are essential aspects of learning. Considering this connection can help us better understand the responsibilities of both students and teachers.

### **Assumption 1: Man Is Not Morally Neutral**

The biblical worldview holds different assumptions about man than the predominant view of education. Unlike Aristotle, the Bible claims that human beings are *not* morally neutral. Rather, we are morally skewed—we are all sinners. We have all fallen short of the glory of God. To be a sinner is not to be morally neutral. To be a sinner is to be morally skewed: to be capable of—and even inclined to—sin. To be inclined to sin is to want to do things that are opposed to the things that God would have us do. Furthermore, human beings are not made sinners by bad education or corrupt culture. Sinning, unfortunately, is something that all of us do because all of us are sinners—we are rebellious at heart.

Now, some of you may be thinking that education plays an important role in our moral lives. I agree that education *does* play a formative role in what we practice and how we practice. However, I would propose that it might take a lot more than education to morally straighten a corrupt person, especially one who does not want to be straightened out. It turns out that more than education makes up one’s moral framework, despite the crucial role that education plays in our decisions.

## Assumption 2: Knowing Is an Act of Will

The biblical view is going to suggest something different from the predominant view about the nature of man and about man's ability to know. The Bible makes it clear that to know God requires a profound act of the human will. God is holy and good, but to know this requires us to admit that we are not. God is merciful, but to know this requires us to see our need for forgiveness. God's promised kingdom alone satisfies, but to know this requires us to recognize the false promises of this world. To be disciples, students of Jesus, we must admit that we are ignorant and that we need to learn. What is supremely true of learning from God is true for education in general. Just as knowing is an act of will, learning, too, is an act of will, and every student must make the choice to learn. We are already familiar with the idea that the Bible diagnoses man as a sinner. Let us consider what role the will plays in man's knowing and learning from a biblical perspective.

If you are anything like me, there are times in your relationships where you find yourself caught in spots where you do not know stuff that you are supposed to know. For example, my wife will lovingly tell me when the doctor's appointment is, where the kids are, or how to tuck in the bedspread. I agree that these are things that I should know, but as it often turns out, I do not, in fact, know them. She is trying to teach me about appointments, kids, and bedspreads, but I am a poor student. Despite her attempts to teach me, I am a poor learner and do not know these things.

Why is that? Why is it that her repeated attempts to try to cause me to know something—something important—do not succeed? Why do I fail to know the things that *I agree* that I am supposed to know? We could point at things like forgetfulness. We could point at misunderstandings. We could point at my bad hearing. All those things I have attempted to use—to little avail—to excuse my profound ignorance of essential domains of daily life. I have a hunch that something fundamental underlies my ignorance in these situations, and I suspect that this fundamental something is the *will*. It would seem that I do not end up knowing things that I do not really want to know. I *should* want to know about appointments, bedspreads, and the rest, but the truth is that sometimes I do not want to know—at least, I do not want to know until it is too late.

I would love to be able to claim this miserable condition as distinctly and idiosyncratically mine, and to give it some colorful, medical-sounding name that resembles my own: Eliotamnesia or Hypomentalgrossoplosion. But I am afraid that if I did so, I would be infringing on territory trod, claimed, and rightly due to many, many other humans.

### *Bible Examples*

Let's take a few examples from the Bible to illustrate the connection between knowing and willing, examples where knowing is directly grounded on man's will and his moral orientation toward truth.

In Genesis, God creates Adam and Eve. As creator and benefactor, God tells Adam and Eve not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.<sup>2</sup> They disregard his commands and eat the fruit anyway. And the consequences follow.

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<sup>2</sup> **Genesis 2:15-17.** The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. 16 And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, <sup>17</sup> but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

In Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul speaks of people that by their unrighteousness suppress the truth about God, exchanging it for a lie. Because of this, God's wrath will come because they denied what has been evident since the creation of the world: who God is and what He has made.<sup>3</sup> And the consequences follow.

The biblical view of how a person acquires moral virtue (which I will mention in a moment) is quite different from the sort of view that Aristotle had in mind. God teaches Adam and Eve what fruit not to eat. He even tells them why. They do it anyway. Paul points out that God teaches man about Himself through the world He has made. And yet, even when God teaches things about Himself through His creation, people still suppress the truth. Is ignorance *really* the problem here? Are they just missing key facts and sound instruction? Is it simply a matter of people not knowing what's right and then haplessly doing wrong as Aristotle would suggest?

No, I don't think knowledge is the problem here. People have lots of knowledge. Adam and Eve had knowledge from God's direct instruction. If we go with Paul, then mankind has knowledge of God from the creation, and we are without excuse. If, by contrast, Aristotle and Hume are correct—that we are passive knowers who are morally neutral—then the kind of knowledge people have about God would have to cause them to do good. To *know* good is to *do* good, right? But this seems not to be the case in either Genesis or in Romans—or even today. People know stuff about God, but it doesn't make them do godly stuff. In fact, people do just the opposite. Knowledge, then, is not the key to goodness.

If knowledge is not enough to make us good, what else could there be? I think it is the grace of God that facilitates any truly good thing that we end up doing—regardless of our educational background. God is putting his law in the minds and writing it on the hearts of his people, as it is written in Jeremiah 31:33. This work that God does in us is miraculous, and fundamental in shaping our will in the right way—a way that is oriented toward caring about the truth. Such shaping can cause us to *care* about what is good and true—it can cause us to *inquire* about what is good and true. We can even come to *learn* what is good and true. The will, from a biblical view, is not an inert lump of red clay. The will is a significant aspect of man's moral framework. It is with his will that man chooses.

Let us consider an example from the Gospel of Matthew to illustrate the relationship between knowing and willing. In Matthew, Jesus has several run-ins with the Jewish chief priests and Pharisees. To them, Jesus teaches with authority, has gained a following, and is a threat to their power and social status. Furthermore, Jesus is calling them out in public, accusing them of hypocrisy and ignorance. The chief priests are getting fed up with Jesus, and they are trying to take him down. Matthew 21:23-27 (ESV) recounts one such incident:

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<sup>3</sup> **Romans 1:18-25.** For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. <sup>19</sup> For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. <sup>20</sup> For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. <sup>21</sup> For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. <sup>22</sup> Claiming to be wise, they became fools, <sup>23</sup> and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. <sup>24</sup> Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, <sup>25</sup> because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

*<sup>23</sup>And when he [Jesus] entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” <sup>24</sup>Jesus answered them, “I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. <sup>25</sup>The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?” And they discussed it among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ <sup>26</sup>But if we say, ‘From man,’ we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet.” <sup>27</sup>So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.” (ESV)*

The chief priests have a question for Jesus. They *seem* like they are trying to learn something. The something they are trying to learn from Jesus is: “by what authority do you do what you do?” They want him to give an answer. Jesus says he will answer their question if they answer one of his questions first. Jesus asks: where did John’s baptism come from—heaven or man? The chief priests huddle up and decide that they will say that they do not know. As a result, Jesus ends up not telling them the answer to their question: by what authority he does what he does. The chief priests do not end up *learning* the answer to their question. Why is this?

The setting of this incident is in the temple where a crowd is gathered. The chief priests refuse to say that John’s baptism came from heaven. If they say that, then they will look like irreverent hypocrites. The chief priests refuse to say “John’s baptism came from man” because that would be something very unpopular to say in this particular crowd and would be to risk putting themselves in social danger or physical harm. (After all, crowds can be unpredictable.) It seems to me that the chief priests do not learn the answer to their question because *they do not ultimately want to know the answer*. And Jesus can tell. They do not want to know by what authority Jesus does what he does because they are not really interested in the truth. They only want to hear Jesus *say* by what authority he does what he does so that they can accuse him and condemn him. I am convinced that even if Jesus were to have given a truthful answer, the chief priests still would not want to believe the truth—that Jesus does what he does by the authority of God. As a result, the chief priests receive no answer and learn nothing because they are not morally oriented toward the truth. The corrupt and crooked state of their *will* prevents them from coming to know the truth.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF A BIBLICAL WORLDVIEW FOR THE ART OF LEARNING**

I have been saying that the predominate view of education is insufficient because it holds two faulty assumptions: first, that human beings are morally neutral; and second, that knowing is a passive action. I have offered a biblical framework that suggests the opposite: first, that human beings are morally skewed—not neutral—and second, that knowing is an act of will. That is, in order to know something, I must want to know it. I can have all the knowledge—all the “facts” in the world—thrown at me, but if I do not want to know something, then I will not know it.

We have seen, then, that our moral bearing plays a significant role in what we know and how we know. To know actively is for our minds to make judgments and decisions when we have experiences. Sense experiences activate other mental faculties, but our minds situate our experiences into pre-existing categories and into a moral framework. When we see the bank

robbery, we judge it as wrong. When we see the child hug the grandparent, our hearts melt. These meanings are actively applied to sense experience by our active mind. Thus, knowing and learning are no more passive activities than humans are morally neutral beings. Learning and knowing engage man's full array of assumptions, dispositions, notions, concepts, ideas, thoughts, desires, and will. Knowing, far from being mechanical fact-processing, is much more of an art that requires deep reflection and skillful judgment that pulls together pieces that may exist beyond what my senses perceive.

So, what does all this mean for the art of learning? First, as a learner—as a student—I would be wise to recognize that I will not learn what I do not want to learn. If I think I am the smartest person in the room, chances are slim that I will be in a position to learn anything from others around me. My pride can rob me of the benefits of learning from all sorts of people.

Second, as a learner—as a student—it behooves me to ask myself what I am actually about. When I step into a scenario, am I ultimately interested in learning anything, or am I actually more interested in something else? If I am interested in learning something, am I ultimately interested in what is true, and am I interested in being Christ-like as I pursue that truth? Will I yield, forgive, humble myself, and put others first; or will I be a bull in a china shop?

Third, as a teacher—one who has students—the old adage “You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink” might be a good one to keep near at hand. Students can learn what they are willing to learn, and no teacher can do a student's learning for him. Teachers can remind, encourage, invite, discuss, respond—but it seems to me that a teacher cannot cause a student to know something that they do not want to know. When students struggle to know, then these can be great opportunities to remind the students that they are ultimately in charge of what it is that they will know or not know. A teacher can ask students what they are about, and why. A teacher can humanize and dignify students struggling with their will to learn. Ultimately, a teacher is responsible for loving their students enough to engage them in dialogue about such things.

While the predominant view of education is defined by its assumptions about man's moral neutrality and passive knowing, the biblical view presents quite a different and—I think—more realistic view of how human learning takes place. The biblical view of man does present and admittedly grimmer view of what we are really like as sinners—an analysis that the predominant view of education rejects. But the biblical view offers great hope in that the ultimate sovereignty over my moral redemption rests in the hands of a God who is both good and loving.

It takes an act of will for me to want to know what is true, and if God is at work in me, then I can trust that He can bring me to the truth. While I am many times a poor student, my great hope and prayer is that the Lord will not give up on teaching me and will continue to guide me toward what is true.

### About the Author



**Eliot Grasso**, vice president of Gutenberg College, has been a tutor at Gutenberg since 2012. He holds a B.A. in music from Goucher College, a M.A. in ethnomusicology from the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick, and a Ph.D. in musicology from the University of Oregon School of Music and Dance. He studies the relationship among melodic variation, cognition, and socio-cultural context. Eliot's scholarship and teaching have been recognized with awards from the Society for Ethnomusicology and the University of Oregon.